

'That Watergate

S.F. Globe Democrat 1-14/15/76

By NANCY WEBB HATTON

MIAMI — He was already uncomfortable. At 59, he was more than twice as old as anyone else in the downtown Miami YMCA scuba-diving class.

"Is your name Howard Hunt?" a fellow student asked.

He grew more uncomfortable.

"Yes."

"WOW, isn't that pretty heavy? A name like that? ... It's the same name as that Watergate guy. Isn't that pretty heavy?"

That Watergate guy — Everett Howard Hunt Jr. — smiled.

"It's heavier than you can imagine."

This was to be an article about how an artist, author, father and retired CIA officer has been living since parole from a Florida federal prison in February. It was not to be an article hinged on the Watergate affair that put Hunt in prison for 32 months.

Hunt resisted. "The fact of the matter is I am not a terribly interesting person. I'm the first to admit it. But a lot of things have been imputed to me ... I think I am no more extraordinary than a guy who becomes, let's say, the chief copywriter for McCann-Erickson (an advertising agency) in New York. Really, that's about my level of competence ... I'm as cut and dried as yesterday's paper."

We talked of scuba diving, hunting, religion, art, managing a household, remarriage, grocery shopping, his children, his cat Fenwick and his college lectures. Regardless of the subject, Hunt would interject a phrase like "When I was in prison" or "Since I've been on parole" or "Because of Watergate..."

He is not just E. Howard Hunt, retired, of Miami Shores.

He is E. Howard Hunt, "that Watergate guy," and he knows the name "will be remembered with different degrees of exactitude. It will become — well, the name has become eponymous with Watergate."

The man and the episode are inextricably fused.

So we talked of Watergate as well.

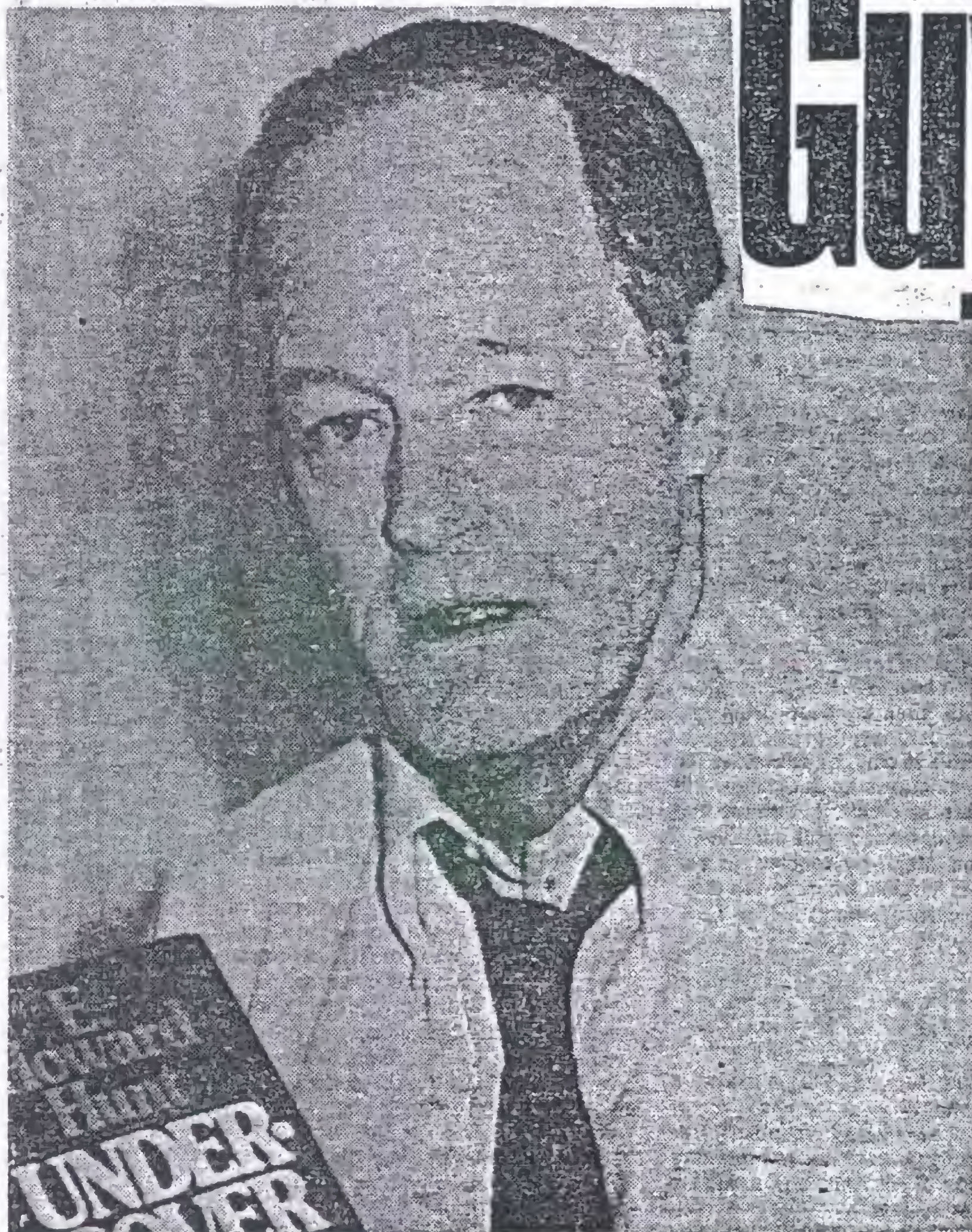
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HUNT'S LIVING AND dining rooms are tastefully decorated but hardly ostentatious, and the rest of the house is typically suburban. Fourteen-year-old son David's fishing tackle box is sometimes left on the coffee table.

The office is organized clutter. The most prominent things in the room are a bronze-colored scale (the symbol of his astrological sign, Libra) and the pelicans — carved pelicans, paintings of pelicans, a pelican wastebasket.

"In Little Havana, they kept calling me El Viejo Pelicano (the old pelican," Hunt says. "I couldn't understand why until someone

Although he has paid his debt to society for his part in scandal, White House 'Plumber' Howard Hunt will never be able to shake that name



E. Howard Hunt, who helped organize the Watergate break-in, has had 53 books published, most of them adventure thrillers.

told me that when the storm comes, he (a pelican) tucks in his wings, sticks it out and weathers the storm instead of flying away. EVP — that's how I sign myself to some friends."

The most obscure thing in the office is his CIA retirement certificate, hung in a corner behind the door. "In recognition of more than

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25 years of faithful service to the United States Government," it reads. It's signed by former CIA director Richard Helms.

"If anybody doesn't know I was with the CIA, this is no time for them to find out," Hunt says jokingly, referring to the almost-daily revelations of alleged agency wrongdoings and the recent Helms scandal.

Hunt's painting studio is the top of a Ping-Pong table on the screened patio.

We go to the pool.

"People will see this and say, 'What right does this man have to a swimming pool?'" Hunt says as he reclines on a vinyl chaise.

Why?

"I guess they'd like me to still be in prison. A lot of people do. Of course, that's a visceral reaction, and I get it from the extreme left of the political spectrum, at the colleges, like the thing I described."

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HE HAD DESCRIBED a recent lecture at "a large, well-respected university (that he didn't want to name)."

"There was something really skittish and odd" about the preparations. Hunt telephoned a program director who told him, "I just wanted you to know that there's been some campus opposition . . . We had an editorial in the (college) paper protesting your coming here."

"If we're talking about whether or not I'm going to appear down there next Tuesday, the answer is yes, I am," Hunt replied.

He was greeted by "six masked figures outside the auditorium door. . . . It was a very shabby sort of thing — a couple of crudely lettered hand signs that said crime does pay — underline does."

After the lecture, Hunt granted an interview to the campus press.

"Before we start this," Hunt said, "let's talk for a minute about the position you've

taken editorially, that you don't want a criminal on campus . . . If you'd restricted yourselves in the past to the policy of never having a criminal on campus, you would have been denied the opportunity to hear and mingle with such historical figures as Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and the Rev. Martin Luther King, to name a few. Take the statesmen from emerging Africa — almost all of them have been jailed by due process by whatever the courts of jurisdiction are in those countries."

Until now, Hunt's speech has been even and slow, but the tempo accelerates and he begins gesturing.

"So the fact of the matter is this — and I could see they were thinking, 'Oh, my goodness, we wouldn't want to do that!' — what we're talking about is you don't want a Watergate figure here. And I can understand that. Nevertheless, the marketplace for ideas is an open one."

Then, "The radio kid thrust a mike in my chops and said, 'Well, how much did you make tonight?'"

"Whatever I made (\$2,000 and expenses) was trivial," Hunt said.

"Crime does NOT pay in my case because the legal expenses that I've been exposed to because of Watergate have cost me over \$500,000 to date, plus the \$10,000 fine, and I was the only one in Watergate who was fined and paid a fine . . . There isn't any way, the rest of my life, under our tax structure, that I could ever again have a half-million dollars in the bank . . . I think it has (paid) very handsomely for some other people, but it hasn't for me.

"I can't show a profit on it. At all . . . In any case, who can give me back three years of my life in prison, in addition to the two years plus I've spent in this imbroglio? That's priceless."

Later, he adds, "For a reason that may seem trivial to you, I don't like being called a criminal. It seems to me that I am an ex-criminal. A criminal to me is a practicing criminal, like a lawyer is a practicing lawyer."

"When a lawyer has been disbarred, then he's an ex-lawyer. I haven't exactly been disbarred from the practice of criminality, but I've abandoned it."

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"JUST LIKE AN OLD Faulkner story," Hunt says, smiling at his bride. "Georgia girl, Florida boy." Hunt and 31-year-old Laura Martin, a Spanish teacher from Albany, Ga., were married just before Christmas in his home. His first wife Dorothy died in a plane crash in 1972.

He had said earlier that he would remarry, "probably fairly soon, I would think because I'm in the eventide of life's allotted span, and it's now when I need a stable home. Not only for my writing, as a background and a feminine influence for my son, but a home is graceless without a woman. I've always felt that. I guess my need is probably felt more keenly because of the prison years."

The couple met while Hunt was in prison, but Hunt's daughter Kevan had become a friend of Laura's in Spain several years ago. "All the (four) children met her over Thanksgiving," Hunt says.

For Thanksgiving, Hunt wanted to cook lobster in white wine with bay leaves, the family's traditional holiday meal. The supermarket was apparently out of bay leaves.

"I was standing there, scanning the spice shelf, and a man came up to me and said,

'You're Mr. Hunt, aren't you,' and I said, 'Yes.' I never know whether to cringe, assume the defensive pose, or to be gracious. He said, 'I don't know what you did, but I want to shake your hand because you had guts. You had guts.' He was one of these repetitive speakers.

"In that same store, two or three times a week, somebody will come up and make themselves known to me, give me their cards, tell me they want to be helpful if I need anything and so forth, and it's just very nice. Very thoughtful. That even if the government isn't doing anything by way of recompense or to ease my transition, single individuals have done so."

Hunt also gets, "Are you who I think you are?"

"Probably," he says. Guessers have responded, "Well, I want to wish you well, Mr. Liddy."

"Literally thousands of people wrote me when I was in prison," Hunt says. "A lot of born-again Christians, so-called, not the least of whom a name I will not mention."

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HUNT PUTS HIS HAND over the tape recorder microphone and mumbles something about Charles Colson. Colson was the White House staff member who phoned Hunt in 1971 and told him he was "needed in the White House as a consultant," Hunt wrote in his memoirs. Hunt accepted the part-time job, became a White House "Plumber", and organized — reluctantly, he says, with G. Gordon Liddy — the June 17, 1972 break-in at Democratic headquarters in Washington's Watergate Office Building.

"I don't like proselytizing. My philosophy is live and let live . . . Most forms of organized religion, I don't subscribe to.

This is a personal matter between my savior and myself if I care to make it so, and I don't need the intervention of a third party, and certainly not a secular third party. . . .

"Whether it's by somebody sending me a folder when I'm in prison and entrapped, or when I'm trying to get quickly through an airport and one of these Eastern cults blocks my way and tries to thrust a flower into my buttonhole. This is an invasion of my turf, of my sensitivity and my sensibilities, and it shouldn't be.

"Talk about their right, their First Amendment right — I have First Amendment rights too. I have the First Amendment right of living alone in an unmolested way. I don't owe anybody anything. Not a dollar. Not even an apology . . . I don't have to apologize because a penalty was exacted of me."

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ONE A MONTH, Hunt visits his parole officer and reports his income, "whether I've been arrested during the month, that sort of thing.

"I can't even go skeet shooting. My ability to vote, of course, can only be restored to me by presidential pardon, which seems highly unlikely. But I would like to be able to go back to northern New York State and shoot deer with my cousins. I received a letter from them about a week ago. They didn't realize that this right (to possess a firearm) is denied me now."

Hunt began painting in prison at a daughter's suggestion. He has no formal training in art, but, "Luckily, a commercial artist-turned-counterfeiter was in prison with me, and he showed me the basics of how you

gesso and prepare a panel or a canvas, and how you blend and tint your colors . . . After about two weeks, he was gone, so that's the extent of the instruction I had."

He exhibited and sold some of his paintings on Miami Beach in May, and will have a second exhibition in Palm Beach this month.

He has had 53 books published, most of them adventure-thriller-espionage novels. He's currently working on No. 54. "I make my living as a writer, as a lecturer and to some degree as a painter, and I hope that (painting) will take primacy as time goes on . . . I'm an established writer and I'm an artist in the process of establishing myself. . .

"I used to write for the New Yorker. Very few people know that. I was a short story writer for the New Yorker. See, I'm written off because of Watergate as some kind of cheapie, but don't forget that I was a Guggenheim fellow in creative writing. . .

"And the reaction of the leftist literary establishment to that, and I quote Gore Vidal for example, is one of fury at the Guggenheim people for having given a burglar the Guggenheim fellowship.

"Well, I wasn't a burglar, and I wasn't involved in Watergate at that time.

"I think that was the year he and Truman Capote applied (for the fellowship) and were turned down." (The Guggenheim Foundation doesn't release the names of applicants, so Hunt's thought is not verified.) Americans have a love-hate relationship with Watergate, depending upon political persuasion. Certainly the liberals, the people of the left, the Democrats and even anti-war people wanted to see Nixon pulled down, and they're among my harshest critics and detractors. Not only of myself, but everybody involved in Watergate.

"Watergate is over with. It's finished. Let's get on to new things. Let me get on to another life that is not Watergate-related.

"There seems to be a lot of resentment in literary circles because I haven't taken the John Dean-Jeb Magruder, handwashing, 'Oh Lord, forgive me for my sin' approach.

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"I MAY HAVE SINNED, but a pretty stern retribution has been exacted from me."

Let's talk about redemption, apologies, forgiveness, he suggests.

"How impudent of somebody to say, 'Well, aren't you sorry, Mr. Hunt, for what you've done? Don't you think that you just owe the American people an apology?' That's very, very shallow."

"Listen, I'm very sorry for the damage Watergate caused to America as a nation, but I certainly was not the progenitor of it. . .

"I find on the lecture circuit that people ask 'Why did you and Mr. Liddy decide to do this?' and I say, look, I didn't do it at all. That decision was made by three people whose names you may have forgotten: John Dean, Jeb Magruder and John Mitchell.

"At that time, John Mitchell was the attorney general of the United States . . . a

member of the Cabinet. John Dean was the counsel to the president."

Hunt says that Liddy told him Mitchell ordered the break-in, "so there it was. But where was Mitchell when the chips were down? . . . And where was John Dean? John Dean was out making a separate peace. Where was Jeb Magruder? Jeb Magruder was out getting religion. So who was left? The four guys from Miami, myself, and Liddy and (James) McCord.

"McCord made a separate peace with (Judge John) Sirica. Liddy went through trial and was convicted. I pled guilty and got a hell of a tough rap."

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Hunt with his second wife, Laura Martin Hunt, at their Miami home. His first wife was killed in an airplane crash in 1972 before he was jailed for 32 months.